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THE HEALTHIEST OF MEN

By Dr. JAMES FREDERICK ROGERS

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“**W**ERE one to preach a sermon on Health, as really were worth doing,” said Thomas Carlyle, “Scott ought to be the text,” for Sir Walter was “an eminently well-conditioned man, healthy in body, healthy in soul; we will call him one of the healthiest of men. . . . On the whole, we might say,” that “in the new vesture of the nineteenth century” he “was intrinsically very much the old fighting Borderer of prior centuries. . . . In the saddle, with the foray-spear, he would have acquitted himself as he did at the desk with his pen. . . . He could have fought at Redswire, cracking crowns with the fiercest, if that had been the task; could have harried cattle in Tyndale, repaying injury with compound interest.” The author of “Ivanhoe” preached in his life a greater sermon on health than even Carlyle could have composed, and, fortunately, we have, straight from his own genial pen, many facts about his physical experiences and unfolding, with additional interesting details from that of his son-in-law, Lockhart.

Like some other giants of literature—Johnson, Gibbon and Dickens—this healthiest of men did not make a very heroic start in life. Scott says:

I showed every sign of health and strength until I was about eighteen months old. One night, I have been told, I showed great reluctance to be caught and put to bed, and after being chased about the room, was apprehended and consigned to my dormitory with some difficulty. It was the last time I was to show such personal agility. In the morning I was discovered to be affected with the fever which often accompanies the cutting of large teeth. It held on three days. On the fourth when they went to bathe me as usual, they discovered that I had lost the power of my right leg. . . . There appeared to be no dislocation or sprain; blisters and other topical remedies were applied in vain.

The disease was (according to Dr. Charles Creighton) an inflammation of the bones of the leg just above the ankle, which, from its painfulness, prohibited its use at the time, and interfered with its complete growth later. Scott continues:

My anxious parent during the course of many years, eagerly grasped at every prospect of cure which was held out by the promise of empirics,

or of ancient ladies or gentlemen who conceived themselves entitled to recommend various remedies, some of which were of a nature sufficiently singular. But the advice of my grandfather, Dr. Rutherford, that I should be sent to reside in the country, to give the chance of natural exertion, excited by free air and liberty, was first resorted to; and before I have the recollection of the slightest event, I was, agreeably to this friendly counsel, an inmate in the farmhouse of Sandy-Knowe. . . . Among the odd remedies recurred to aid my lameness, some one had recommended that so often as a sheep was killed for the use of the family, I should be stripped, and swathed up in the skin, warm as it was flayed from the carcass of the animal. . . .

I was in my fourth year when my father was advised that the Bath waters might be of some advantage to my lameness. . . . My health was by this time a good deal confirmed by the country air, and the influence of that imperceptible and unfatiguing exercise to which the good sense of my grandfather had subjected me; for when the day was fine I was usually carried out and laid down beside the old shepherd, among the crags or rocks round which he fed his sheep. The impatience of a child soon inclined me to struggle with my infirmity, and I began, by degrees, to stand, to walk, and to run. Although the limb affected was much shrunk and contracted, my general health . . . was much strengthened by being frequently in the open air, and, in a word, I, who, in a city, had probably been condemned to hopeless and helpless decrepitude, was now a healthy, high-spirited, and, my lameness apart, a sturdy child.

An illness or accident is sometimes a blessing in disguise, and possibly had Sir Walter not been so crippled in his early years he might not have been led into his love of books nor have drunk in the tales of romance from the lips of the country folk with whom his lameness had thrown him. He learned also the lure of the historic country where he lived which later sent him on many a pedestrian tour in which he unconsciously collected the material for his future works. As Carlyle puts it,

Disease, which is superficial, and issues in outward "lameness" does not cloud the young existence; rather, forwards it towards the expression it was fitted for.

His mind became strong on the varied food it gathered from every source, but his body did not yet give promise of much vigor. His attendance at school was consequently irregular, but though he was poor in some studies he was "neither a dunce nor an idler." Along the lines of his own bent he was "one who wished to know and will know everything." He says:

At the age of sixteen my health, which, from rapid growth and other causes, had been hitherto rather uncertain and delicate, was affected by the breaking of a blood vessel. The regimen I had to undergo on this occasion was far from agreeable. It was spring, and the weather raw and cold, yet I was confined to bed with a single blanket, and bled and blistered till I scarcely had a pulse left. I had all the appetite of a growing boy, but was prohibited any sustenance beyond what was absolutely neces-

sary for the support of nature, and that in vegetables alone. Above all, with a considerable disposition to talk, I was not permitted to open my lips without one or two old ladies who watched my couch being ready at once to souse me,

“imposing silence, with a still sound.”

Lockhart says the bleeding was from a vessel of the bowel and that “his uncle, Dr. Rutherford, considered his recovery from it as little less than miraculous. His sweet temper and calm courage were no doubt important elements of safety.” Waverly continues:

My constitution recovered from the injury it had sustained, though for several months afterwards I was restricted to a severe vegetable diet . . . and though I gained health under this necessary restriction, yet it was far from being agreeable to me, and I was affected whilst under its influence with a nervousness which I never felt before or since. A disposition to start upon slight alarms—a want of decision in feeling and acting, which has not usually been my failing—and acute sensibility to trifling inconvenience—and an unnecessary apprehension of contingent misfortunes, rise to my memory as connected with my vegetable diet, although they may have been entirely the result of the disorder and not of the cure. Be this as it may, with this illness I bid farewell both to disease and medicine, for since that time, till the hour I am now writing (he had reached 36 years) I have enjoyed a state of the most robust health, having only had a complaint of occasional headaches or stomachic affections when I have been long without taking exercise, or have lived too convivially—the latter having been occasionally, though not habitually, the error of my youth, as the former has been of my advanced life.

My frame gradually became hardened with my constitution, and being both tall and muscular, I was rather disfigured than disabled by my lameness. This personal disadvantage did not prevent me from taking much exercise on horseback, and making long journeys on foot, in the course of which I often walked from twenty to thirty miles a day without fatigue. Wood, water and wilderness had an inexpressible charm for me.

His biographer adds,

He partook profusely in the juvenile bacchanalia of that day, and continued . . . down to the time of his marriage. . . . No man in mature life was, however, more habitually averse to every form of intemperance. He could, when I first knew him, swallow a great quantity of wine without being at all visibly disordered by it, but nothing short of some very particular occasion could ever induce him to put this strength of head to a trial, and I have heard him say many times: “Depend upon it, of all vices, drinking is the most incompatible with greatness.”

He wrote to his son:

Even drinking what is called a certain quantity every day, hurts the stomach.

If, as a young man, he followed the convivial habits of those about him, he had no vices. He used tobacco very moderately, but at fifty-four he wrote:

I have given up cigars and have no wish to return to the habit.

It was when he entered on his life's work that he fully appreciated his health and strength. He knew the need for temperance in meats and drinks and for muscular exercise, and until the avalanche of debt plunged him in ceaseless toil with his pen, he maintained both.

He did most of his literary work before breakfast and this became his chief meal. Says Lockhart:

No fox hunter ever prepared himself for the field with more substantial appliances. His table was always provided, in addition to the usually plentiful delicacies of a Scotch breakfast, with some solid article, on which he did most lusty execution—a round of beef—a pasty, such as made Gil Blas' eyes water, or, most welcome of all, a cold sheep's head. . . . A huge brown loaf flanked his elbow. . . . But this robust supply would have served him in fact for the day. He never tasted anything more before dinner, and at dinner he ate sparingly."

Sir Walter's financial difficulties began when he was forty-one, and between these and his ambition to establish a magnificent house at Abbotsford, he found himself led into an intemperance in work that sorely tried even his extraordinary powers. His literary labor, large as it was, was but a part of his daily work. That was disposed of by early rising, before breakfast, and at odd moments.

The immense strain of Scott's double or quadruple life as sheriff and clerk, hospitable laird, poet, novelist and miscellaneous man of letters, publisher and printer, though the prosperous excitement sustained him for a time, soon told upon his health.

At the age of forty-five he was visited "for the first time since his childish years with a painful illness." His pushing of "his liberties with a most robust constitution to a perilous extreme while the affairs of the Ballantynes were laboring" had brought their penalty. Four years before he had advised Mr. Ballantyne:

You must positively put yourself on a regimen as to eating, not for a month or two, but for a year at least, and take regular exercise. . . . I know this myself, for if I were to eat and drink in town as I do here, it would soon finish me, and yet I am sensible I live too genially in Edinburgh as it is. I take enough of exercise and enough of rest, but unluckily they are like a Lapland year, divided as one night and one day. In vacation I never sit down; in the session time I seldom rise up.

A cramp in the stomach, which, after various painful visits, as if it had been sent by Prospero, and had mistaken me for Caliban, at length chose to set fire to its lodging like the Frenchmen as they retreated from Russia.

For the inflammation thus set up "bleeding and blistering was the word; and they bled and blistered till they left me neither skin nor blood."

To aching eyes each landscape lowers,
 To feverish pulse each gale blows chill;
 And Araby's or Eden's bowers
 Were barren as this moorland hill.

"Rob Roy" was written this same year, and,

With returns of his cramps it had been a "tough job"—for lightly and airily as it reads, the author had struggled almost throughout with the pains, or the depressing effect of the opium taken for their relief. Calling on him one day to dun him for copy, James Ballantyne found him with a clean pen and a blank sheet before him, and uttered some rather solemn exclamation of surprise. "Ay, Ay, Jemmy," said Scott, "'tis easy for you to bid me get on, but how the deuce can I make Rob Roy's wife speak, with such a curmurring in my guts?"

He struggled to recover his loss of health, and the next year writes:

I have taken hard exercise with good effect and am often six hours on foot without stopping or sitting down.

But at forty-seven his health was still "very totterish." His last attack of colic ended in jaundice,

so that I might sit for the image of Plutus, the god of specie, so far as complexion goes. . . . If I had not the strength of a team of horses, I could never have fought through it, and through the heavy firing of medical artillery, scarce less exhausting—for bleeding, blistering, calomel and ipecacuanha have gone on without intermission.

The following year his health seemed quite restored. As a boy he "climbed like a wild cat" and his venturesomeness remained, for he writes in his journal:

Please God, I will be on the roof of the old Abbey (Melrose) when the scaffolding is up.

At fifty his favorite exercise was in wielding the axe, and none of his woodmen excelled him in bringing down a tree with the fewest possible strokes.

In 1825, in the midst of apparent prosperity, he was plunged by the failure of the publishing firm with which he was connected, into the worry and Herculean labors of trying to pay his creditors their due of \$750,000. Under this added strain he felt keenly any signs of bodily failure. Reminiscently he writes:

My early lameness considered, it was impossible for a man to have been stronger or more active than I have been, and that for twenty or thirty years. Seams will slit, and elbows will out, quoth the tailor; and as I was fifty-four 15 August last, my mortal vestments are none the newest.—Bodily health is the mainspring of the microcosm. . . . What poor things does a fever fit or an overflowing of bile make of the master of creation.—What a detestable feeling this fluttering of the heart is! I know it is nothing organic, and that it is entirely nervous; but the

sickening effects of it are dispiriting to a degree. Is it the body brings it on the mind, or the mind that inflicts it on the body? . . . As to body and mind, I fancy I might as well inquire whether the fiddle or fiddle-stick makes the tune.

During the following winter 1826-27, Sir Walter suffered great pain, but he was as stout of heart as any of the heroes of his romances, and, the following year, he writes :

There is a touch of the old spirit in me yet, that bids me brave the tempest—the spirit that in spite of manifold infirmities (of my childhood) made me a roaring boy in my youth, a desperate climber, a bold rider, a deep drinker, and a stout player at single stick, of all which valuable qualities there are now but slender remains.

At fifty-eight came the first stroke of apoplexy from which he quickly recovered, but other attacks soon followed, and the giant who, as a young man, “could lift a smith’s anvil with one hand—by what is called the horn,” and who once fought three highwaymen for an hour, found himself “if not quite unable to write” yet “unfit to do it. . . . A total prostration of bodily strength is my chief complaint. I can not walk half a mile. There is besides some mental confusion.” At sixty came a more severe shock, “the crowning blow” which was followed by his death in the ensuing year.

In the years of his physical perfection Scott

had a fresh, and brilliant complexion. His eyes were clear, open and well set, with a changeful radiance, to which teeth of the most perfect regularity and whiteness lent their assistance, while the noble expanse and elevation of the brow, gave to the whole aspect a dignity far above the charm of mere features. His smile was always delightful. . . . His figure, excepting the blemish in one limb, was eminently handsome; tall, much above the usual standard, it was cast in the very mold of a young Hercules; the head set on with singular grace, the throat and chest after the truest model of the antique, the hands delicately finished; the whole outline that of extraordinary vigor, without as yet a touch of clumsiness.

The sermon on health preached in his life by Waverly needs no commentary. Like all really great men, he was fully aware of the preciousness of his physical powers. Only six years before his death he writes :

I have perhaps all my life set an undue value on these gifts. Yet it does appear to me that high and independent feelings are naturally, though not uniformly or inseparably connected with bodily advantage. Strong men are usually good humored, and active men often display the same elasticity of mind as of body.

Carlyle, not without some warrant, bitterly scored his abuse (a conscious abuse) of his powers for the purpose of setting up a great house, but had the publishing concerns in the failure of

which he was involved been more carefully conducted, he would never have been shouldered with the extra worry and work which hastened his bodily dissolution. Had he been less strong morally and refused to shoulder his enormous weight of debt it had gone differently with his health of body. The abuse of health for mere accumulation of earthly goods and earthly repute is to be condemned, but the shortening of one's life to the end that others may have their rights and their just dues, marks the man as the hero, and the greater the bodily gifts which he sacrifices the greater his heroism. If Scott sinned in taxing his body unnecessarily for attaining wealth and prosperity he made up for it by the greater gift of all his powers to make good the results of commercial errors in which he shared only in name. In meeting the claims of his creditors "he paid the penalty of health and life." He was as heroic in soul as in body, and the greater, because of the greatness of his bodily sacrifice.